

Multiple records of a Red-tailed Tropicbird *Phaethon rubricauda* on Inaccessible Island, Tristan da Cunha

by Alexander L. Bond, Gregory T. W. McClelland, Trevor Glass,
Katrine Herian & Lourens Malan

Received 3 March 2015

Red-tailed Tropicbird *Phaethon rubricauda* is a widespread tropical seabird, breeding on islands in Hawaii and the South Pacific extending as far as Chile and eastern Australia (Hutton 1990, Aguirre *et al.* 2009), as well as throughout the tropical Indian Ocean from Europa and Aldabra in the west to Indonesia and Western Australia in the east (Marchant & Higgins 1990, Nelson 2005). Breeding sites span from c.30°N to 30°S, but birds at sea have been reported well beyond these limits.

Inaccessible Island (37°18'S, 12°41'W) is part of the Tristan da Cunha group in the central South Atlantic, c.2,800 km from South Africa. It supports a diverse seabird assemblage (Moseley 1879, Ryan *et al.* 1990, Ryan & Moloney 2000) that currently numbers at least 15 breeding species, mostly Procellariiformes (Ryan 2007, RSPB & Tristan Conservation Department 2010).

On 17–18 February, and 16–17 March 2011, a Red-tailed Tropicbird was photographed flying over Skua Pond and Blenden Hall on Inaccessible Island (Fig. 1). It was pursued by Brown Skuas *Stercorarius antarcticus*. A similar bird was observed in the same place on 20 and 25 March 2012, and heard on 24 March 2012. On 13–15 February 2015, a Red-tailed Tropicbird was again seen being pursued by skuas over Skua Pond (Fig. 2). Based on plumage characteristics, all observations appeared to involve adults (or more likely, the same bird; LeValley & Pyle 2007).



Figure 1. Red-tailed Tropicbird *Phaethon rubricauda*, over Inaccessible Island, Tristan da Cunha, 18 February 2011 (Lourens Malan)



Figure 2. Red-tailed Tropicbird *Phaethon rubricauda*, over Inaccessible Island, Tristan da Cunha, 18 February 2015 (Gregory T. W. McClelland)

The nearest Red-tailed Tropicbird breeding site to Tristan da Cunha is Europa Island in the Mozambique Channel (22°23'S, 40°21'E; Safford & Hawkins 2013), >5,300 km away, where 3,000–4,000 pairs breed (Le Corre & Jouventin 1997). A small colony on Nosy Vé, near Anakao, Madagascar (23°39'S, 43°36'E) is >5,500 km away, but hosts just c.250 breeding pairs (Cooke & Randriamanindry 1996, Le Corre & Bemanaja 2009). Other colonies, >6,500 km away, are in Seychelles and Mauritius (Safford & Hawkins 2013).

Tropicbirds from the western Indian Ocean can range widely (Le Corre *et al.* 2012), and vagrancy in tropicbirds is well known. A Red-tailed Tropicbird ringed in Western Australia was recovered three years later on Réunion, nearly 6,000 km away (Le Corre *et al.* 2003). Records of Red-tailed Tropicbirds in the Atlantic are few, with just three previously confirmed—singles on the Atlantic coast of South Africa in 1927 and 1978 (Batchelor 1979, Harrison 1983), where it is also occasionally observed on the Indian Ocean coast (Batchelor 1979), and one on Arquipélago dos Abrolhos, Brazil, in September 1997 (Couto *et al.* 2001).

The tropicbird(s) at Inaccessible were probably not breeding, as only one was ever seen, and duet flights were not observed (Diamond 1975, Schreiber & Schreiber 2009). However, in all cases, birds were seen over land, which could suggest prospecting behaviour. Other vagrant tropicbird records in the Atlantic include Red-billed Tropicbirds *P. aethereus* in the UK (BOU 2003), Canada and the north-east USA (Mactavish 2005, 2007), and a White-tailed Tropicbird *P. lepturus* found dead in Newfoundland (Mactavish 2007). Ours, though, is the first record of any tropicbird in the Tristan da Cunha group, the fourth documented Red-tailed Tropicbird for the Atlantic Ocean, but only the second beyond coastal South Africa, and represents considerable vagrancy of >5,000 km from the species' normal range.

Acknowledgements

We thank the Administrator and Island Council of Tristan da Cunha for permission to work on Inaccessible Island, and for their continued support. L. Bugoni provided details of Brazilian records. Funding for our research was provided by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and government of Tristan da Cunha. Comments from M. Le Corre and E. A. Schreiber improved this manuscript.

References:

- Aguirre, J. E., Johow, F., Seeger, H., Johow, J. C. & Rubio, M. 2009. Nuevos registros de aves nidificantes en las Islas Desventuradas, Chile insular. *Bol. Chileno Orn.* 15: 44–55.
- Batchelor, A. L. 1979. Records of Redtailed and Whitetailed Tropicbirds in South African waters. *Cormorant* 7: 21–23.
- British Ornithologists' Union (BOU). 2003. British Ornithologists' Union Records Committee: 29th report (October 2002). *Ibis* 145: 178–183.
- Cooke, A. & Randriamanindy, J. J. 1996. Red-tailed Tropicbird *Phaethon rubricauda* colony, Nosy Vé Islet, Toliara. *Working Group on Birds in the Madagascar Region—Newsletter* 6: 2–6.
- Couto, G. S., Interaminense, L. J. L. & Morette, M. E. 2001. Primeiro registro de *Phaethon rubricauda* Boddaert, 1783 para o Brasil. *Nattereria* 2: 24–25.
- Diamond, A. W. 1975. The biology of tropicbirds at Aldabra Atoll, Indian Ocean. *Ank* 92: 16–39.
- Harrison, P. 1983. *Seabirds: an identification guide*. Houghton Mifflin, Boston.
- Hutton, I. 1990. *Birds of Lord Howe Island – past and present*. Lithocraft Graphics, Melbourne.
- Le Corre, M. & Bemanaja, E. 2009. Discovery of two major seabird colonies in Madagascar. *Marine Orn.* 37: 153–158.
- Le Corre, M. & Jouventin, P. 1997. Ecological significance and conservation priorities of Europa Island (Western Indian Ocean), with special reference to seabirds. *Rev. Ecol.* 52: 205–220.
- Le Corre, M., Salamolard, M. & Portier, M. C. 2003. Transoceanic dispersion of the Red-tailed Tropicbird in the Indian Ocean. *Emu* 103: 183–184.
- Le Corre, M., Jaeger, A., Pinet, P., Kappes, M. A., Weimerskirch, H., Catry, T., Ramos, J. A., Russell, J. C., Shah, N. & Jaquemet, S. 2012. Tracking seabirds to identify potential Marine Protected Areas in the tropical western Indian Ocean. *Biol. Conserv.* 156: 83–93.
- LeValley, R. & Pyle, P. 2007. Notes on plumage maturation in the Red-tailed Tropicbird. *Western Birds* 38: 306–310.
- Mactavish, B. 2005. Atlantic Provinces & St. Pierre et Miquelon. *N. Amer. Birds* 59: 564–565.
- Mactavish, B. 2007. Atlantic Canada. *N. Amer. Birds* 61: 30–32.
- Marchant, S. & Higgins, P. J. (eds.) 1990. *Handbook of Australian, New Zealand & Antarctic birds*, vol. 1(B). Oxford Univ. Press, Melbourne.
- Moseley, H. N. 1879. Chapter V. Tristan da Cunha, Inaccessible Island, Nightingale Island. *Notes by a naturalist an account of observations made during the voyage of H.M.S. "Challenger" round the world in the years 1872–1876, under the command of Capt. Sir G.S. Nares, R.N., K.C.B., F.R.S., and Capt. F.T. Thomson, R.N.* Macmillan, London.
- Nelson, J. B. 2005. *Pelicans, cormorants, and their relatives*. Oxford Univ. Press.
- Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) & Tristan Conservation Department. 2010. *Gough and Inaccessible Islands World Heritage Site management plan April 2010–March 2015*. RSPB, Sandy.
- Ryan, P. G. (ed.) 2007. *Field guide to the animals and plants of Tristan da Cunha and Gough Island*. Pisces Publications, Newbury.
- Ryan, P. G. & Moloney, C. L. 2000. The status of Spectacled Petrels *Procellaria conspicillata* and other seabirds at Inaccessible Island. *Marine Orn.* 28: 93–100.
- Ryan, P. G., Dean, W. R. J., Moloney, C. L., Watkins, B. P. & Milton, S. J. 1990. New information on seabirds at Inaccessible Island and other islands in the Tristan da Cunha group. *Marine Orn.* 18: 43–54.
- Safford, R. & Hawkins, F. (eds.) 2013. *The birds of Africa*, vol. 8. Christopher Helm, London.
- Schreiber, E. A. & Schreiber, R. W. 2009. Red-tailed Tropicbird (*Phaethon rubricauda*). In Poole, A. (ed.) *The birds of North America online*, no. 43. <http://bna.birds.cornell.edu/bna/species/043>. Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Ithaca, NY.

Addresses: Alexander L. Bond, Gregory T. W. McClelland, Katrine Herian & Lourens Malan, RSPB Centre for Conservation Science, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, The Lodge, Sandy, Bedfordshire, SG19 2DL, UK, e-mail: alex.bond@rspb.org.uk. Gregory T.W. McClelland & Trevor Glass, Conservation Dept., Govt. of Tristan da Cunha, Edinburgh of the Seven Seas, Tristan da Cunha, TDCU 1ZZ, South Atlantic Ocean. Lourens Malan, Govt. of St Helena, Jamestown, St. Helena, STHL 1ZZ, South Atlantic Ocean.